

## **New Models For Higher Education: Creating an Adult-Centered Institution**

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### ***AN ERA OF CHANGE***

We are witnesses to a unique era of human history during which global forces are combining to produce rapid and profound change on a heretofore unknown scale. A sense of disequilibrium pervades every aspect of our lives and is placing great stress on society's fundamental institutions. None of our systems are spared, including our global system of higher education.

Academics face a unique dilemma. By profession, we study the changes and forces for change in society and its institutions. We measure, evaluate, and predict these changes and their ramifications to other areas of life and culture. We propose interventions that will deal with the dislocations and chaos our organizations face. Ironically, many of us seem to believe that our own educational institutions and networks of institutions should remain static—as if that were even a possibility; as if there were a platonic form for colleges and universities to which we should be attempting to conform. Like it or not, of course, higher education is as subject to the aforementioned forces as any other societal entity.

As with every other type of institution, we know that new structural forms will appear as well in higher education—the result of varied combinations of economic, demographic, cultural, and technological forces. Some of these will disappear as quickly as they arose. Others, having met some basic societal need, will survive and even displace revered but obsolete structures that have been unable to adapt. This is not to suggest that traditional colleges and universities will disappear. It is most likely that a variety of institutional types will exist and prosper. But some will fail and all will invariably be changed by these forces. This chapter describes one institutional variation, the University of Phoenix, which arose in the United States over the last quarter century—the result of the forces adumbrated above.

### ***CREATING AN “ADULT-CENTERED” UNIVERSITY***

In 1976, the leading edge members of the Baby Boom generation were just turning 30. That same year saw the introduction of the first personal computer, the Apple I—an event that signaled the birth of a new economic system through which intellectual capital would eventually supplant industrial might as the dominant global economic force. These milestones also marked the beginning of a sea change in American higher

education, though many (perhaps even most) within that system did not recognize it at the time.

Considered together, these phenomena suggested that the jobs that would make up the workforce of the future were only just beginning to be created or imagined. In order to fill those jobs, the bulk of the new workforce would require different, higher-level knowledge and skills than those needed in a manufacturing economy. At the same time, the largest-ever age cohort of the population, working adults, would be going through the stages of life during which they would be most affected by the coming economic dislocation and would need advanced education to adapt to these changes.

It was in this historical context in 1976, that Dr. John Sperling, a Cambridge-educated economist and professor-turned-entrepreneur, founded University of Phoenix. Sperling anticipated the confluence of technological, economic, and demographic forces that would in a very short time herald the return of ever-larger numbers of working adults to formal higher education.

Over the course of the past quarter-century, University of Phoenix has become the largest private university in the U.S., with a current enrollment of nearly 140,000. It operates campus locations where face-to-face instruction is provided, in 26 states, Puerto Rico, British Columbia, and Rotterdam in the Netherlands. It also currently enrolls nearly 50,000 degree in its Online Campus, including representatives from 40 different countries. The University attributes its growth to an unwavering focus on serving its unique student population, including the creation of a teaching/learning model designed specifically for working adults. It has been equally devoted to creating an organizational culture in which innovation and continuous improvement are core values. The University's future includes plans for international expansion, primarily through its Online Campus.

Many of these same dynamics seen in the United States are also evident in other areas of the world. Increasingly, global economic development will depend not only on educating young people to take their places as citizens and preparing them to earn living wages, but also on the revitalization of the existing population of working adults through the practices of lifelong learning. Responding to global economic competition will require a more rapid retooling of a country's work force than waiting for new workers to enter will allow. Thus, institutions like University of Phoenix may offer lessons about structuring higher education for non-traditional students.

### ***BEGINNINGS***

In the early 1970's, at San Jose State University in San Jose, California, Sperling and several associates conducted field-based research in adult education. The focus of the research was to explore teaching/learning systems for the delivery of educational programs and services to working adult students who wished to complete or further their education in ways that complemented both their experience and current professional responsibilities.

At that time colleges and universities were organized primarily around serving the needs of the 18-22 year-old undergraduate student. That is not at all surprising, given that the large majority of those enrolled were residential students of traditional college age, just out of high school. According to Sperling working adult students were invisible on the traditional campus and were treated as second-class citizens:

Other than holding classes at night (and many universities did not even do this), no efforts were made to accommodate their needs. No university offices or bookstores were open at night. Students had to leave work during the day to enroll, register for classes, buy books or consult with their instructors and advisors. Classes were held two or three nights per week and parking was at the periphery of a large campus. The consequence, according to Dr. Sperling was that most working adult students were unable to finish a four-year program in less than eight years, or a two-year program in less than four years (Tucker, 1996, p. 5).

Sperling's research convinced him not only that working adult students were interested in furthering their educational goals but also that they differed from their younger counterparts in significant ways. He saw a growing need for institutions sensitive to and designed around the learning characteristics and life situations of the working adult population. He suggested how these institutions would pioneer new approaches to curricular and program design, teaching methods, and student services.

These beliefs eventually resulted in the creation of University of Phoenix, and they continue to this day to inspire the University's mission, purposes, and strategies. As an institution, University of Phoenix is unique in its single-minded commitment to the educational needs of working adults. This focus informs the University's teaching and learning model, approach to designing and providing student services, and academic and administrative structure. It also guides the institution as it plans and prepares to meet the needs of working adult students.

### ***A UNIQUE MISSION***

The University's Statement of Mission and Purposes focuses clearly on student learning and identifies that focus as the vehicle through which broader institutional goals will be pursued. It also emphasizes innovation, convenience, continuous improvement, and service quality as essential to the achievement of the University's mission.

#### **MISSION**

The mission of University of Phoenix is to educate working adults to develop the knowledge and skills that will enable them to achieve their professional goals, improve the productivity of their organizations, and provide leadership and service to their communities.

#### **PURPOSES**

- To facilitate cognitive and affective student learning—knowledge, skills, and values—and to promote use of that knowledge in the student’s work place.
- To develop competence in communication, critical thinking, collaboration, and information utilization, together with a commitment to lifelong learning for enhancement of students’ opportunities for career success.
- To provide instruction that bridges the gap between theory and practice through faculty members who bring to their classrooms not only advanced academic preparation, but also the skills that come from the current practice of their professions.
- To use technology to create effective modes and means of instruction that expand access to learning resources and that enhance collaboration and communication for improved student learning.
- To assess student learning and use assessment data to improve the teaching/learning system, curriculum, instruction, learning resources, counseling and student services.
- To be organized as a for-profit institution in order to foster a spirit of innovation that focuses on providing academic quality, service, excellence, and convenience to the working adult.
- To generate the financial resources necessary to support the university’s mission.

### ***ATEACHING/LEARNING MODEL FOR WORKING ADULTS***

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Because University of Phoenix exists to serve the working adult population, the University’s teaching/learning model is grounded in the theoretical and empirical literature of adult learning and cognitive psychology, and employs best practice from the adult education literature. Its essential features include:

#### *Active Learning*

The model is based first on the assumption that the learner’s active involvement in the learning process is essential to good practice. Creating instruction that utilizes the affective domain enables the adult learner to connect more extensively with the cognitive domain. Thus, University of Phoenix classrooms are intended to be dynamic learning spaces. Instructors are expected to serve as facilitators of learning who manage the learning process by engaging learners in a variety of activities (lectures being but one) that lead students to an understanding of course content and the development of academic and professional competence. By involving students in a variety of learning activities, respect is demonstrated for diverse ways of learning and knowing. Interaction and participation in classes and learning teams is expected. While there are certainly didactic elements in every course, these are augmented and enhanced by student participation through discussion, debate, reflection, and application.

#### *A Learning Environment Based on Collaboration*

The effectiveness of cooperation and collaboration in enhancing learning is well and widely documented. Structures that encourage and facilitate collaboration are central to the teaching/learning model. Working adults generally come to formal learning activities with significantly greater life and work experience than their younger counterparts. This means that learners themselves can be invaluable resources in enhancing their own and others' learning. Traditional pedagogy emphasizes a top-down, vertical transfer of information. Adult students with rich and varied experience find benefit in instructional practices that encourage collaboration. This adds a robust "horizontal" dimension to the learning exchange as adult students teach and learn from one another.

### *A Unique Program Format*

University of Phoenix does not operate according to a traditional academic calendar. New student cohorts can begin at any time and classes are held throughout the year without traditional quarter or semester breaks. Typically, graduate courses at University of Phoenix meet for six consecutive weeks and undergraduate courses meet for five weeks. When a course ends, the next course usually begins the following week. This intensive calendar allows adult students to achieve their educational goals in a more time-efficient manner.

The University's low student/faculty ratio and class sizes that average 13 students facilitate active learning and collaboration, encourage time-on-task, and foster high student-faculty interaction. As a rule, students take only one course at a time. This allows focus on one subject. This structure enhances learning and helps students balance ongoing professional and personal responsibilities.

### On-Campus Instruction

During a typical on-campus course, students participate in two instructional activities each week—a four-hour workshop facilitated by the faculty member—and a 4-5 hour learning team session. Learning teams are intact groups of from three to five students drawn from within the larger cohort. Learning Teams foster students' abilities to collaborate—a competency expected of employees in information age organizations and one of the University's primary learning goals. Faculty members closely monitor the learning team activities, outcomes and processes through review of learning team logs and charters.

### Online Campus Instruction

Students who complete their academic programs through the Online Campus participate in an asynchronous electronic conferencing format that allows them to participate at the times and places that work best for them within required timeframes. The University is also developing a new instructional format called FlexNet—a hybrid delivery method that blends the campus and online modalities.

### *An Emphasis on Application and Relevance*

There is wide agreement in the literature that adults learn best when bridges are built between new knowledge and the learner's experience. Practices that encourage reflection and application are based on the recognition that a learner's experience provides a context through which he or she is more able to construct meaning from new information. It also makes learning relevant to the learners, increasing affective connection with subject matter and the likelihood that they will respond with a deep versus surface approach to learning. In University of Phoenix courses, students' past experiences and current circumstances are interwoven with subject matter in class discussions as well as in individual and learning team assignments. Students very often say they are able to apply at work the next day what they learned in class the night before.

### *Building Professional Competence*

The University's faculty leadership has established five broad "learning goals" that guide curriculum development, instruction, learning assessment, and program evaluation and improvement. The first of these goals, *Professional Competence and Values*, relates to the discipline-specific course and program content. University of Phoenix wants its graduates to attain levels of theoretical and practical disciplinary knowledge appropriate to the levels of degrees or credentials they are earning (i.e., bachelor, master, or doctoral level). The remaining four goals relate to the development of competence in essential intellectual and social processes that will enable graduates to practice their professions successfully. They are *Critical Thinking and Problem Solving, Communication, Information Utilization, and Collaboration*.

## ***OTHER FEATURES OF THE MODEL***

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### ***Convenience of Time and Place***

University of Phoenix classroom programs are offered at times and in places that are convenient to working adults. Classes are held primarily in the evening and on weekends when working adults are most likely to need access. Wherever possible, campuses and learning centers are located at strategic locations near major freeways and thoroughfares that permit convenient access. Campus facilities, including both instructional and administrative space, are generally housed in Class A or equivalent space, and are established under long-term leases of from 5-10 years. This allows the institution to respond with flexibility to shifts in population.

### ***Adult-Friendly Student Services***

University of Phoenix has found that adult students tend to hold higher expectations of student services than their younger counterparts. These students expect from the University the same levels of attention and convenience they expect from any other service provider. Increasingly, this implies 24 x 7 access to student services. Services are provided through electronic or telephone access as much as possible though person-to-person service is always available. For example, rather than requiring students

to drive to a campus bookstore, texts and course materials are ordered via the Internet or by toll-free telephone and delivered directly to the student's home.

Students attending University of Phoenix Online courses enjoy the same commitment to student service as campus students. Through years of experience in online education, the University has learned that an even greater investment in the quality and availability of student services must be made to ensure that students who attend courses at a distance persist and succeed. The Online Campus is structured around the particular needs and abilities of the kinds of students who select distributed learning as their preferred method.

### ***THE UNIVERSITY'S FACULTY***

From the founding of University of Phoenix to the present day perhaps the greatest institutional challenge has been to build innovative structures that support the University's unique mission. The result is a model that assures that essential roles performed by the faculty in any teaching university are also fulfilled at University of Phoenix—though sometimes in a different fashion. To a degree, this model represents what has come to be referred to as an unbundled or disaggregated approach.

#### ***Why A Different Faculty Model?***

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Based on his initial field-based research in the early 1970s the University's founder, Dr. John Sperling concluded that a classroom full of adults enrolled in professional education is a qualitatively distinct place from one filled with 18-22 year-olds. He found that adult students brought very different expectations regarding the kind of instruction they receive than did his younger students in a traditional setting. According to recent research by the College Board (Aslanian, 2001, p.16) more than 80% of adults who return for advanced education do so because of a desire to advance in their professions and careers. That percentage is up from 70% just a decade ago.

From an instructional standpoint, the most significant issue relates to the resulting expectation that instruction will be of immediate practical relevance. This does not mean that working adults do not recognize a need for or desire an understanding of the theory of a discipline—especially when they come to understand how a grasp of theory helps them in situations and events in the professional setting and enables them to predict the consequences of interventions. They do expect, however, that the theory will be taught in the context of practice and application. As a result, they often display a lower degree of patience for instructors who are not equipped by experience to do this. This is significant because working adults, having consciously chosen to pursue education, often at significant personal and financial cost, are more likely to vote with their feet and pocketbooks. This should not be taken to indicate that adult students want their education to be easy—they readily grasp that rigor and credibility are related. It has been the University's experience that in order to attract and retain adult students; format and instruction must be consistent with their self-perceived needs as well as the educational needs an institution identifies for them.

John Sperling discovered that the faculty members favored by these students, and those from whom they reported learning more, brought to the classroom not only advanced academic preparation in a field but also the significant practical professional experience that facilitated the marriage of theory and practice. He also noted, based on his comparison of learning outcomes, that there was no degradation of results. He ultimately concluded that an institution whose sole mission was to serve working adults could craft an innovative model that used these insights to its advantage and set out to do so.

### ***Implications of the Faculty Model: Faculty Roles***

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Outcomes data suggest that a teaching faculty comprised predominantly of professional practitioners is an effective way to educate working adults. Adopting this model has required, however, that University of Phoenix develop processes and support structures for ensuring that essential faculty roles are appropriately filled.

The roles filled by the faculties of most higher education institutions generally include research, teaching—which refers to a group of activities that include classroom instruction, grading and evaluation, student advisement, participation in academic governance, and service to the larger community. Additionally, most colleges and universities rightly cede control of the content of the curriculum to the faculty. It is often implied, however, that each member of a faculty is responsible to shoulder all of these roles. Even if this were possible, the reality is that individual members tend to gravitate to those tasks and roles for which they have particular liking or expertise. This “unbundling” of faculty roles occurs naturally. Through identifying the academic process goals that various faculty roles have evolved to serve, University of Phoenix has disaggregated the process and assigned specialized responsibility for its parts.

### ***A Core of Full-Time Faculty***

The University employs a core cadre of full-time faculty members. These faculty members spend the majority of their time in teaching or instruction-related activities. They provide instructional leadership, oversee academic quality assurance, and provide guidance and support for the rest of the faculty. They are involved in faculty selection and training, participate in curricular oversight activities, and serve as members of the Academic Program Councils, described below

This core cadre of full-time faculty assumes crucial leadership for the various academic processes and provides consistent oversight of the curricula and instructional quality. It may also be useful, however, to describe University philosophy regarding the part-time “practitioner” faculty. Significant dependence on these professionals to fulfill teaching and other governance roles at the University has made it essential that the University view them and support them differently than part-time faculty members are often viewed. For example, University of Phoenix purposely refrains from using the term “adjunct” because the University’s faculty model requires that they not be positioned as adjunct to the full-time faculty. All faculty members, whether full-or part-time, are

viewed as full and essential members of the University faculty community. The professional practitioners who serve on the faculty participate in the same assessment and developmental processes as their full-time colleagues.

### ***Curricular Oversight***

It is widely accepted that responsibility for the curriculum of an academic program properly rests with full-time members of a faculty who are both firmly grounded and current in the body of knowledge of that discipline. This guarantees the coherence of program structure and design as well as the appropriateness of requirements, objectives, and outcomes. Traditionally, this process is the province of Curriculum Committees to which faculty representatives are assigned. At University of Phoenix, the equivalent of the Curriculum Committee is the Academic Program Council. Academic Program Councils are created for each academic program within a college. These councils include at least four full-time faculty members and four practitioner faculty members recognized as instructional leaders and content specialists. Selected administrative specialists serve as staff advisors on operations and logistical issues.

### ***Course Design and Development***

In a traditional academic setting, individual faculty members are responsible for the design of their own course outlines and syllabi. It is assumed that the disciplinary grounding of full-time faculty members qualifies them to determine the objectives and content for a course based on the current body of knowledge. With a teaching faculty comprised largely of professional practitioners who are not full-time academicians, the University must ensure that course content reflects the current state of theoretical knowledge in a particular field. For this reason, teams selected from both full-time and practitioner members of the faculty are recruited and contracted to create an expanded syllabus or “module” for each University of Phoenix course. The teaching faculty member is then able to marry the sound theoretical foundation contained in the course module to the knowledge of current practice in the profession.

Curriculum development teams that create these modules are comprised of both full-time and practitioner faculty members collaborate with a curriculum development manager who oversees the documentation process, and an instructional designer who ensures that the course “maps” appropriately to program objectives and the University’s Learning Goals.. Additionally, a set of teaching notes is created to assist the preparation of a faculty member assigned to teach the course. Finally, the team identifies and describes the academic and professional qualifications a faculty member must have to be approved to teach the course.

The course module is not set in stone, however. Latitude is given to the teaching faculty member to exercise academic judgment. He or she may choose to enhance or change assignments and design learning activities not included in the teaching notes. The basic requirement is that the course must be taught and assessed to the objectives identified by the faculty team at the appropriate academic level.

## *Teaching*

As mentioned previously, the University practices a collaborative, facilitative instructional model. For this reason, and because the majority of University of Phoenix instructors are not traditional full-time faculty members for whom teaching is a primary occupation, it is incumbent on the University to ensure that those appointed to the faculty can demonstrate the ability or potential to teach effectively in this environment.

To this end, all faculty candidates participate in a rigorous screening and assessment process. It begins with a resume or curriculum vitae review to ensure that they meet the basic requirements for approval, which include a graduate degree from a regionally accredited institution and at least five years of employment in their field—two of which must have occurred subsequent to completion of a master's degree. Practitioner faculty candidates must also be currently employed in the discipline in which they teach. The next step is a “content interview” with an experienced faculty member from the candidate's discipline. The purpose is to ensure that candidates bring the breadth, depth, and current knowledge of the content area in which they will be teaching.

Candidates are then invited to demonstrate their ability to facilitate learning in an assessment experience during which candidates are observed and evaluated by senior faculty members. Additionally, all new faculty members complete extensive training as part of the Faculty Certification Process—a four-session course augmented by Web-and paper-based readings and training modules. This experience is designed to model appropriate facilitation practice at the University and provides additional content and training in areas such as adult learning theory and practice, facilitation skills, learning team administration, grading, evaluation, assessment, governance and administrative procedures, and the University Library. The Faculty Certification module was developed by a team of full-time faculty members from four of the seven regions across the University, two representatives from central administration academic affairs and an instructional design consultant

Those who successfully complete this process then apply for approval to teach specific courses offered by the University. The Dean or his/her designee judge the member's academic and professional experience specific to the faculty course approval requirements created for the course. The final step for a new faculty member is participation in a mentorship with an experienced faculty member during the first course he or she teaches.

Ongoing training and development opportunities are made available to the entire faculty through regular faculty training meetings and Web-based training modules. Additionally, faculty members receive a Faculty Handbook that includes the Faculty Standards with which faculty members are expected to comply in order to remain in good standing with the University, as well as all pertinent policies, procedures, and expectations.

### ***Faculty Scholarship***

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University of Phoenix is a teaching institution whose focus is professional education for working adults. While formal academic research is not a requirement of the practitioner faculty, the University recognizes that an important precursor to fulfillment of the fundamental aspects of our Mission and Purposes related to student learning and development is a faculty that engages appropriately in scholarly activities. In an institution that serves a specialized population and employs a disaggregated or unbundled faculty model, this necessitates a different approach to scholarship than would be found in a traditional setting.

Contrary to perceptions that a faculty comprised so largely of practitioners would not actively engage the “scholarship of discovery”, a recent compilation of scholarship activities of the University’s faculty indicates otherwise. The University has recently begun a process of automating its faculty files. This has allowed the aggregation of reports of the academic and professional activities in which the University’s faculty is involved and the scholarship produced. The initial results of the survey among full-time faculty suggest that there is significant ongoing scholarship—in all the dimensions described by Boyer—taking place within the Faculty.

Additionally, the University’s Virtual Community of Scholars, is an online community that fosters exchange of research ideas and resources among faculty and doctoral students. Faculty chat rooms serve as links for exchange of best practices, both in education and in real world application and trends across disciplines. It is designed to promote scholarship and to provide a forum for the University’s faculty to appropriately publish their research and learning. This new endeavor is still in the early stages of development.

### ***INSTITUTIONAL AND OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT—ENSURING CONSISTENT QUALITY***

Over the last two decades, University of Phoenix has made significant investments in developing and maintaining institutional research capabilities. These systems measure and evaluate the University’s effectiveness in achieving objectives and improving institutional processes. The foundation of the University’s evaluation and assessment efforts was laid in the 1980’s. This foundation continues to rest on two pillars refined in the early 1990’s—the Academic Quality Management System (AQMS) focusing on the performance of educational support systems including faculty, curriculum, and student services, and the Adult Learning Outcomes Assessment (ALOA) focusing on the measurement of student learning in both the cognitive and affective domains.

These assessment systems have brought significant public recognition to University of Phoenix over the past decade and the institution has continued innovation in this area through a “reengineering” of its assessment processes over the last two years.

### *Making a Difference in Communities*

When University of Phoenix enters a community, it is sometimes perceived as a threat to existing institutions. Initial concerns tend to subside with the realization that the University focuses on a different population segment than most others. Additionally, the resources spent to attract new students stimulate a general interest in higher education and, ultimately, contributes to an overall increase in adult students returning to other institutions as well.

The University of Phoenix provides social and economic benefits by helping to meet the educational needs of working adults without adversely impacting the existing higher education system. As a for-profit, adult-centered institution, the University does not draw on states' educational resources, but instead offers economic advantages. Some of these advantages include: a) withdrawal of less federal and state income taxes and local property and sales taxes, returning more to the public treasury than their students take out in the form of grants and below-market federally insured loans; b) access to private capital for funds needed for start-up and/or expansion; and c) operation from leased commercial space that can be designed and built in a matter of months to meet student needs. Perhaps, most importantly, the University contributes to state economies by providing educational opportunities so that working adults can enhance their knowledge and skills and as a result, continue to be productive citizens.

With the University's emphasis on professional programs, these are some of the areas where it is making a contribution in the communities it serves:

- Twenty-five percent of the University's enrollments during 2001 entered degree programs where significant national shortages are being reported (Information Systems and Technology, Teacher Education, Health Sciences and Nursing, Counseling and Human Services).
- Since its establishment in 1976, 125,000 students have graduated from University of Phoenix. In the year 2000, more than 25,000 students graduated from University of Phoenix and continued to be a part of the nation's workforce.
- Nearly 65 percent of University of Phoenix students who begin two, three, or four-year degree programs, whether in campus-based or Online Campus programs, will complete them, despite the competing interests of work, family, and community. This is in contrast to a national graduation rate in the U.S. of 58 percent.
- University of Phoenix has demonstrated a significantly higher than average level of participation and graduation by members of minority populations. Fully 40% of University of Phoenix students identify themselves as members of an ethnic minority.
- 65 percent of the University's candidates for admission come from referrals from satisfied students, alumni and their employers.
- 94 percent of graduates said they would recommend the University of Phoenix to another adult student.
- 43 percent of graduates reported receiving a promotion since completing their degrees.

In the lives of its many adult students, the University's contributions will be life changing. The educational experience provided has helped foster new ways of seeing the world and has improved quality of life; it has contributed to the success of the organizations as they become more effective professionals, thinkers and problem-solvers; and it enables them to make contributions in their communities and to the larger society.

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